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PATRICIA
COMES HOME

By
L.A.G. STRONG

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PATRICIA COMES HOME

BY L. A. G. STRONG

PICTURES BY RUTH COBB

OXFORD ; BASIL BLACKWELL

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PATRICIA COMES HOME

By L. A. G. STRONG

"Speed, bonny boat, like a bird on the wing,
Loudly the sailors cry;
Carry the lad who is born to be king
Over the sea to Skye."



HE train left the little station, and began to puff loudly between the overgrown sides of a cutting. Patricia's heart beat faster, and she looked for the fiftieth time at the letter lying open on her lap. "Soon after Beasdale," she read, "you will see them, out of the left-hand window facing the engine." Her window, in fact. And the last station had been Beasdale. She stared rigidly out of the window, barely seeing the great blur of foliage that rushed by so close against it. Oh, would the cutting never come to an end!

"R-round the next corner," said a voice, making her jump, and Patricia found herself looking into the eyes of the old gentleman opposite her. He had looked quite fierce when he got in at Fort William, with his white moustache, and white eyebrows rising up to a point at the outsides: but now he was smiling, and his eyes held such a charming twinkle that Patricia felt herself smile back almost before she had decided that she wanted to.

"Only another minute," continued the old gentleman. "I remember well how impatient I used to be myself for the trees to thin out and give me my first view."

"I—I've never seen them before," said Patricia.

"So I gather, or ye would no require to be consulting yon letter so frequently."

"I am a Scot, you see, and all my mother's people lived in Arisaig for generations: but when she married daddy, she had to leave, of course, because his work was in the South, and soon after that my grandmother—oh!"

The train had quickened, swung round a curve, and then suddenly shaken itself clear of the trees with an impatient



movement that brought it right out into the open. Before Patricia's eyes lay a wide stretch of water—and the Islands.

There, real at last, was Eigg, with its fantastic scuir stuck up in the air, exactly as it looked in the pictures they had at home. There were the noble curves and stately mountains of Rum. And there, as the train swung further round, was the long end of Skye. Patricia drew a deep

breath, and a thrill ran through her very being. She had turned white; when a fresh curve hid the Islands again, she sat staring straight before her, with parted lips.

For all the fourteen years of her life, even before her first conscious memory, the legend of the Islands had been all around her. Island lullabies had hushed her in her cradle, Island tunes had been her music, Island lore her fairy-tales. As soon as she could read, she had plunged deep into every book she could lay her hands upon that told of the Islands or the men connected with them. She read of 'Tir Nan Og, and could sing the Skye Fishers' song that tells of it. She knew the rebellion of 1745, and traced Prince Charlie's course in her atlas till he came to Arisaig and thence sailed "over the sea to Skye." Mrs. Winter had brought her children up in the atmosphere of her own Scottish home, and taught them from the first to long passionately for that homecoming of which she and her husband dreamed, and the house they were to buy back again when he had made his fortune.

The train whistled, and stopped at a little station on a hillside above the water.

"This is Arisaig," said the old gentleman.

Arisaig—Patricia craned her head, hoping to see the very place Prince Charlie's boat had left.

"Furrther round," smiled her companion. "At least, that is the opinion of the best received authorities."

Patricia flashed a smile at him.

"Your mother's name would have been a Miss Graham?" he asked, after a moment's silence.

"How did you guess that?"

"I live at Morar, and so am well acquainted with your family. Yet, even before you told me, I had recognised you. The family likeness is very strong. You bear a great resemblance to cer-rtain of your forbears."

"They all say at home I'm exactly like my great-great-

grandmama," smiled Patricia. "Daddy showed me a picture of her, and I certainly am *rather* like."

The old gentleman laughed.

"I can hardly claim to remember her, old man though you must think me," he said. "At the same time, I would have been certain you were a Graham. Eh, eh! It's a great pity your grandmother is not at Arisaig yet."

"Yes." Patricia's face became sad. "Poor darling granny lost nearly all she had after grandpapa died, and so Mor had to be sold."

"I remember." The old gentleman's eyes were sympathetic. "It was very sad for her."

"Mummy's funny, you know," confided Patricia. "She's been asked lots of times to go and stay with our cousins, who live close by, but she said she could never bear to go there except to the dear old house. She's letting me come, as I haven't been before, but she won't come herself till Daddy has made enough money to buy Mor back again."

"Let us hope that will soon be. My name is Larminie, by the way. I live at Morar. Your cousins are my good friends. If ye are staying long, you must come and see me. Eh, look now—ye can get a good view of Skye."

And for the rest of the journey to Morar, the station where her cousins were to meet her, Patricia was feasting her eyes on the views that swept one after another across the window.

"There's Mor," she cried suddenly, pointing to a corner of grey roof which showed through some dark trees, almost on the sea's edge; for she had seen so many pictures, and the country had been so well described to her, that she could hardly believe she had not been there before.

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There was little to be done that evening, for it was after tea-time when she arrived, and her cousins insisted that she must go to bed early after the all-night journey from

London. Though only cousins, they had reached an age when one had to elevate them to the rank of honorary aunts and uncles, and obey them accordingly. Still, she was able to get a walk around the grounds, and down to the sea's edge. Darach, her cousins' house, stood some half a mile below Mor, and its grounds ran right along the coast, and then swerved inland. The sandhills and fore-shore were of course free to all comers, and Patricia's first surprise when she came out upon the sand was to meet a number of cows meditatively wending their way home across it.

Patricia had been put in charge of Colin, the youngest son of the house, a good-looking boy of about fifteen. He was polite enough, but let it be seen that he considered girls a bore. Patricia did not resent this; she thought it quite natural, and hated being forced on him. Besides, she wanted to be alone. As soon as they were out of sight of the house, she turned to him impulsively.

"I say, please don't bother about me. I'm sure you've got lots you want to do. I'm quite all right, really. I'll just walk about on the shore for a while, and then go back."

He shifted from one foot to the other, and smiled at her.

"It's awfully nice of you. I—well, as a matter of fact, I *did* rather want to see old Angus, about some lines. He's the boatman, you know."

"Do go. Really, I'm quite all right by myself."

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Not a bit." Patricia almost said "I'd rather," but checked herself, for fear of sounding rude.

"Right, then. Thanks most awfully."

He smiled again awkwardly and ran off across the sandhills. Then Patricia visited one after another the places which were sacred to her, the rocks and bays which she

knew by heart. Skye, eight miles across the still water, was dark and very clear. Tiny fields near the water's edge mottled it, like vivid patches on a green counterpane. Higher up it became brown and rugged: and then, far away in the interior, rose that amazing jagged line of peaks, the Coolins. The Isle of Skye: just to say the name under her breath had always been magic to her, and now there it was, close across the water, before her very eyes. Patricia walked right down to the edge, and the quiet sea broke in little intimate waves at her feet. Above her was the immense sky; all the coast was dark and still; the only sound was the calling of some oyster-catchers far out over the rocks. Deep down in her, Patricia knew she had come home. All she saw was—not friendly, it was too grand and impersonal for that—but as if she had become a part of it. She fitted in. Her country did not turn her away as a stranger.

Before she went back, Patricia climbed Lookout Hill, toiling up, past a crofter's hut where a goat was tethered and bleated after her till the slope hid it. From the top, she could look all along the coast on her domain. On the north were the steep headlands above Mallaig, the little fishing port. She could almost smell the herrings, so vividly had her mother described it. Inland were the mountains, majestic and splendid, their huge green curves varied with scars and veins of rock: seaward were the Islands, and to the south she could see all down the coast to Ardnamurchan, one long flurry of bays and little islands. There were so many of these islands that it seemed as if Prince Charlie's country had been loth to let him go, and had tried to follow him across to Skye, stretching out its arms far into the sea to hold him back. Patricia's eyes came back to the grey house and the ridge of pines, and she gave a sigh of utmost happiness.

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There is no time to go into all her adventures during the days that followed. It is enough to say that she explored all along the coast, made friends with the crofters and their wives, went out twice in the boat with Angus and Colin, caught two fish, and was chased by a bull. The last was not as dangerous as it sounds, for she only had a little way to run, and the bull was some distance off. Still, a bull is a bull, and it was quite frightening enough. Also, Colin had been instrumental in making her form a certain resolution, of which there will be more to say presently, and which landed her in her biggest adventure of all.

Behold her then, a week after her arrival, going for a walk one afternoon by herself. The morning had been wet, but just before lunch the great soft, ragged clouds had been blown away from the mountains like so many cobwebs, and heather and fern sparkled in the sun.

Patricia walked up past the back of Mor, feeling a real tug at the heart as she caught a glimpse through the trees of the fountain and balustrade, which appeared in so many of her mother's photographs, and took a rough track that led inland to the first range of hills. The going was rough, and, as soon as she could, she left the track and began scrambling up the sheer side of the valley. She had long since discarded stockings and ordinary shoes. Gym shoes were much better, she found. Whenever your feet grew hot, you simply stood in a stream, and went on with cool squelching steps, refreshed. Not that there was any need of that today, for heather and grass were sopping, and the ends of her skirt soon began to flap wetly against her legs. Yes, gym shoes were much the best things to wear. The only drawback was that stones hurt one's feet in them.

The climb was steep. Patricia was now a good way above the track, which was content to wind its way up leisurely and take things easy. She herself had to tack,

slipping every now and then, and hanging on to the heather roots to pull herself up. It would be nice to——

A low whistle made her jump and look anxiously around. It seemed to come from a little nest of rocks above her.

There it was again. A shepherd, perhaps.

Patricia stood still. Her heart was beating so loud after the climb, that it seemed to fill the whole valley. She looked back. How big everything was! And—part of the same thought—how small was she—in the midst of the loneliness!

“Whe—e—e—e—w!”

There—that certainly came from the rocks. Someone was calling her. Patricia was not quite sure whether she was frightened or not.

“Hullo?” she called, doubtfully.

No answer.

“Hullo! Are you whistling to me?”

She stared full at the rocks, and then, very cautiously, a head rose over one of them, and a pair of eyes looked down at her. Next, a hand appeared, and unmistakably beckoned her to come up.

So up she scrambled, and a minute later found herself face to face with a young man who was reclining rather negligently on a couch of heather and dry ferns, and looking at her with a strange expression in his dark eyes.

“Good day,” said the young man at last.

Patricia said something, she couldn't remember what, because her eyes were busy in taking in the young man's appearance. He was very handsome, she decided at once, though he didn't seem to have shaved lately, and his hair was in a tangle across his forehead. He was in Highland costume, and Patricia saw with a little shiver of sympathy that his knees were badly scratched with brambles.

“Mistress Graham?” he smiled.



"I—well—that is——" Patricia began to explain, but he cut her short.

"Oh, you must not deny your name. It is written in your eyes, and all across your face."

Patricia smiled back at him. There was no sense in explaining the whole thing to him. She was a Graham, after all.

"This is a long way for you to come by yourself."

His voice had a soft musical note. Patricia felt she could listen to him for hours.

"Oh, I want to go much further than this. You see, I haven't ever been here before."

The young man seemed surprised.

"My family—my mother's family, that is—lived here for ages: but this is my first visit."

He frowned. Evidently he was puzzled.

"My mother had to leave, you see."

"Oh, aye," cried the young man, almost bitterly. "Like many another. And there'll be more yet."

It was Patricia's turn to look blank, and, seeing her surprise, he went on in a gentler tone:

"It is a beautiful country, is it not?"

"Lovely!" All of Patricia went into that one word. "I've felt it since I was born. I knew, somehow, it was going to be like this. It's in the tunes—and everything——"

"Ah!" The young man's eye flashed. "You like the tunes?"

"I love them!"

"Do you know this?"

And he sang something so proud, so angry and beautiful, that Patricia trembled all over, and her eyes filled with tears.

"No," she gasped, when he had finished. "I never heard that."

"Then you will," he said. "That song shall be sung when we are all forgotten."

He looked away from Patricia for a moment, and his jaw set hard.

"It's Gaelic, isn't it?" she ventured presently.

"Gallic—yes." He pronounced the word differently.

"Do you speak it?"

"Only a little, I'm afraid."

There was a silence. The young man picked up a pebble



and played with it in the palm of his hand. Then he looked up at Patricia.

"For the sake of a Graham who was my good friend, will ye do something for me, little lassie?"

If anyone else had called her "little lassie," she would have stiffened all over; but there was a look in his eyes that made her answer, "Yes, oh yes," at once.

"You see that hill yonder, above the wood?"

"The one on the right of Mor—yes?"

"Take your eye to the top. Come down a little. Now, to the left. Do you see a small slanting rock?"

"Yes. Yes."

"And, just behind it, a clump of bushes?"

"Y-e-es. I think so. Oh yes."

"Very well." He looked at the sun, and made a swift calculation. "Will you be there at precisely an hour before sunset tonight?"

"Tonight?" Patricia's face fell. "I'm afraid—tonight—unless it's *dreadfully* important——"

"What—cannot ye come tonight?"

"Well, you see, it's like this." Patricia seated herself confidentially on the ferns beside him. "I've got a plan on for tonight that I simply can't work at any other time. At least, I mightn't be able to do it, and tonight I know I can."

And she told him what her plan was. He listened to it all, and at the end nodded several times.

"Good," he said. "'Twill do him good, and yourself too. Only, mind the currents. Out by the Sisters, there, they can be very bad."

"I will. Really, I'll be awfully careful."

"Eh? Well, so you cannot come tonight. Well," he smiled grimly to himself. "It can wait. The next night will do."

"I'm sure I can come then, unless it's wet." Patricia paused and thought. "What am I to do when I get there?"

"There is a little cave there, in the bushes. You will see what to do. Remember—and do the best you can."

"It's—it's very mysterious," said Patricia. "Can't you tell me a little more?"

"It will be plain enough." He smiled again. "And now I must bid you good-bye." Still keeping under cover of the rocks, he stretched out his hand, without rising.

“ Good-bye.”

Feeling rather stunned and bewildered, Patricia climbed down again. When presently she looked up, to see if he was watching her, the young man had disappeared into his nest of rocks, and she was quite alone. There didn't seem any sense in going on with her walk now: she was too much disturbed in mind to enjoy the scenery properly. What did it all mean? Did he want to kidnap her, or something? No, that was silly, because if he had, he could have done so at once. In any case, Patricia was sure he didn't mean her any harm. Oh, well, she'd just have to go there tomorrow evening, and see what it all was. Meanwhile, she had plenty of other things to think about.

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Patricia scrambled up to the top of the sandhills, the last place where she could be seen from the house, and, after a reassuring glance behind her, slid thankfully down the soft white sand on the far side. Her escape had been well timed. The drawing-room, where the grown-ups had their after-dinner coffee, looked westward right across the two fields she had had to cross; but there was always three or four minutes from the time their Aunt nodded permission to Patricia and Colin to leave the table, until the company passed leisurely into the drawing-room, Uncle Harry still in the midst of a story, Uncle George exclaiming at the sunset: and while they crowded to the windows, shading their eyes against the dazzling radiance of it, no one was likely to see a small figure top the sandhills and disappear.

Patricia slid to the bottom, the sand covering her ankles, and hurried along the reedy path to the rocks where the boat was moored. Her heart was beating very fast, not altogether because of the speed she had made. The project, conceived in a flight of daring, had taken firmer and firmer hold, until it seemed a duty. For days she had been waiting

her chance. Of course, if Colin hadn't boasted so, and been so careful to point out the inferiority of girls——

She turned the last corner, where the path opened upon a little white beach, and hurried across to the rocks. If Colin, aged fifteen, could take the boat out at night by himself, so could Patricia, aged fourteen. At any rate, she was going to have a jolly good try. He had put on such airs, talked to her so loftily and condescendingly of his exploit, how he managed the boat single-handed and caught several fish into the bargain, that her first impulse of congratulation had been smothered.

"Well, what about it!" she had said at length. "Anyone would think it was something wonderful."

"You couldn't do it, anyway," he sneered.

"Couldn't I!"

"No, you couldn't."

Patricia had made no definite claim, so the debt she was now paying was to herself alone. Obstinate, terrifyingly, the idea had grown, like an unselfish thing you knew you ought to do, but didn't see why you should, till at last it got such a hold on your conscience that you knew you must do it even if you died. If she was to keep any self-respect at all, she must carry this through; but already she wished she were at home.

She scrambled over the rocks, and there below her was the boat, riding at its moorings. Usually she stood, looking pensively out to sea, while someone else unmoored it, and brought it in, and she stepped into its friendly hull and settled herself as she was bid. This evening it looked dark and derisive. "Catch me if you can," said the boat, and the ripples that lapped under its empty sides seemed to chuckle with it. But the last time she had been out, Patricia's eyes had been very busy, and there was not much of the procedure she had missed. Only it was so hard to remember when you weren't used to it. If only she had

attended better the first time. But then, she had never known she would want the knowledge. That was the worst of being a girl; people did things for you, and so you never learned how to do them yourself.

The first step was the most frightening. They moored the boat by a rope through the ring in her bow, to which, on the far side, the anchor rope was tied. You pulled on the mooring rope till the boat came near enough to the rocks for you to jump aboard. Obviously it couldn't be moored loose enough to come all the way, or else the waves and wind would knock it against the rocks, and dent its side in. Patricia pulled, leaning back with her full weight, and the old slow boat turned grudgingly round and came towards her. A broad ripple arose from its bow, and, once started, it came easily enough. Then, as Patricia knew it would, it slowed up, feeling the strain of the anchor rope, and stopped, a good six feet away. Now for step number two. Having pulled the boat so far in, you had a great deal of slack mooring rope on land with you. Holding on tight with one hand, you had to gather up the slack of this rope in the other and somehow throw it aboard till it hitched up in the rowlock. Then you could swing her right round, moving along the rocks with her, until the stern came near enough for you to jump. The rope was heavy and wet, and Patricia made several futile throws, nearly overbalancing into the water, before she succeeded. Then she tugged hard, and the old slow, stupid thing swung round. As she was tied by the head, her stern came much nearer in than her bow had done—but still it seemed a long way to jump, even from the nearest spur of rock one could reach. Nerving herself quickly, Patricia dived forward, as she had seen Colin do, landing with her tummy across the stern and her legs dangling out stiffly behind. The light impulse sent the boat only a little way out, and Patricia, marvelling at her good fortune, scrambled aboard and started hauling

for the anchor. Should she just knot the ropes, and drop them overboard, or take the anchor with her? Safer to have it, perhaps, in case a current got up and carried her off—but suppose she put it in the wrong place when she came back, and the boat was dashed on the rocks. Then she reflected that the rope was only long enough for an anchorage in shallow water. That settled it. She knotted



the ropes determinedly, drew a breath, and dropped the knot overboard. Now she was afloat, with a vengeance.

Quickly, lest her resolution falter, she got out the trolling lines from their little locker, and the twig which, fixed in a rowlock hole, showed when a fish was hooked. To take the boat out was not enough : she must have fish to attest the deed. To walk back, at about half-past nine, and toss the hank casually on the scullery table. "These may come in useful tomorrow, Deborah." Sensation !

One line would be as much as she could manage, she decided. If you had two, then, as soon as you stopped to take in a fish on one, the other sank straight to the bottom, and got caught in the weeds. She chose a line with a twirling red rubber eel for bait, laid it in readiness in the stern, and started to get out the sculls. The tide was falling: already she had drifted nearly to the mouth of the little natural harbour.

The sculls were heavy, and it took her all her time to lift each and plump it into the rowlock. Once in the water, she could handle them fairly well. She had rowed at home, when her father took her out. A few strokes, and the boat slid clear of the rocks with refreshing ease, and headed for the open sea. Patricia's purpose was to row along the fringe of rocks that jutted out to Codling Point, and then across the strait to a series of four big rocks called The Sisters. The two biggest had a little grass on their topmost levels, and were perhaps a hundred and fifty yards long: the others were just rocks, yet each had its name. The waters around these were famous for fish, and each rock was the home of hundreds upon hundreds of gulls. From Codling Point to the nearest of them was perhaps three-quarters of a mile: and Patricia meant to row right round the two big Sisters and return as she had come. On so calm an evening there was every chance of fish. She dared not risk a longer excursion, as she wanted to get back before dark. With any luck there would be a moon, but, once the sun had gone down, it was dark inside the hour, and Patricia was taking no chances.

The current, setting outward, carried her easily along to Codling Point. The rocks, with their top layer of bright wet weed swishing languidly to and fro, looked friendly and familiar in the warm light. Patricia glanced over the side. She was in deep water now: time to put the line out. She drew the sculls in crosswise, as Colin did, and stepped

over them into the stern. One had to be very careful not to get the trace tangled up: the tip of her tongue played about her upper lip in witness of the concentration with which she paid out the line, hand over hand, to the length required. This done, she stuck the twig in place, and wound the bight of the line around it, carefully carrying back the wooden square to which the end was tied and passing it twice round the centre seat, for safety. Straightening up with a grunt of satisfaction, she suddenly forgot line and everything, catching her breath in wonder.

The sun, which had sunk under a cloud, came out for a long minute on the ocean's rim behind her, and flooded the land and the mountains with unbelievable glory. The water around the boat took fire, the rocks turned almost blood red, the white sands of the beach glowed a pale rose. The hills above the house, when one's eye had escaped the tiny blazing windows, leaped up in a richness that was no nameable colour: and the mountain, mighty Craig Colman, that sheer towering mass of rock and precipice—Patricia gasped, and the whole marvellous vision dazzled before her. The pride, the galloping energy of the Western coast was flung up in a splendour that had no harshness, a magnificent harmony with no weak line: and the clouds about the mountain's head, though matching him in majesty, were soft and clear as the softest of down feathers.

Then, while she cleared her eyes with the back of her hand, the shadows on the mountain deepened, the whole panorama flushed darkly: hesitated: and the light, from the beach upward, went out quietly and simply. The whole coast seemed to shrink and huddle down into an angry blue, that would soon soften and darken into night. Only the high clouds kept anything of revelation: and Patricia, coming to herself with a sigh, remembered the line, which was trailing forlornly deep astern, and made a few panic strokes lest it catch in the bottom and be lost. No; all was

well. The twig took the strain, leaning in a steady curve, and Patricia, reaching Codling Point, gave three strong strokes with her left hand and headed north-west to the Sisters.

Her fears had left her now, and she hummed as she sculled easily along over a sea which seemed mysteriously to have soaked up all the light in the world, so much more alive was it than land or sky. Flocks of gulls flew slowly past her to their sleeping places on the Sisters. Their whiteness had left them: they looked tired and dark against the sky. A tern went by, his body dropping visibly between each stroke of his wings. All were silent, but she could hear sleepy cries from the Sisters ahead of her. Everything seemed deep in an incommunicable happiness.

Suddenly, with an ugly, irregular jerk, the twig in the stern came alive. A fish! Patricia shipped the oars clumsily in her haste, and grabbed the line. Yes, it was a fish right enough. She began hauling in, with shaking hands, remembering halfway through that you should let the wet coils fall on the seat, not in the bottom of the boat, where the leaping fish was certain to tangle them up. Blow! He was getting under the stern. She wasn't close enough to land him. She stepped over, making the boat wobble sleepily, but she had let the line go slack, and when she pulled it, the fish was off.

"Oh, well!" sighed Patricia philosophically. "Plenty of time yet." She let the line out again; the rubber eel was wriggling most attractively.

"I'm glad Colin wasn't here, to tick me off," she reflected, with a grin, and set to rowing once more. Hullo! the Sister had moved; she was out of her course. She corrected it, and discovered in the next few minutes that the offshore current was steadily taking her out to sea. This was easily remedied: Patricia headed well inland of her destination, and plodded on. It was rather fun being out by yourself,

she decided. You missed the comfortable feeling of having someone else to depend on, but it was very easy, this managing a boat, and if she had got out all right, there was no earthly reason why she shouldn't get in. Telling herself this, she pulled on, and reached the first Sister.

Its colour told her how much the light had failed since she left Codling Point. Really, you had to screw your eyes up to see into the shadows. It was thick with birds, standing all together, in meditative sleepy attitudes. Only a few stirred: the great majority took no notice of her.

There was one huge, alarming tug at the line, but nothing came of it, and Patricia was well past the near Sister and almost at the second before she caught her first fish. It wasn't a big one, but she landed it safely, broke its neck, and got out the line again without mishap. Now, at any rate, she would not have to go back empty-handed. A great peace stole over her. How beautiful the world was! Slowly, easily, so as not to disturb the birds, she passed the second Sister, rounded its point, and prepared to complete her circuit. She felt the current, but it did not seem strong, and she pulled steadily along. A few minutes later she had her first real reverse. Looking round at the Sister, she saw, with a sudden chill inside, that she was in practically the same place. However, a few strong pulls soon put that right. She could make way well enough: it was just that she had been taking things too easily. Bracing her feet against the seat opposite, she pulled with a will, and had the satisfaction of seeing the stubborn Sister pass and begin to drop astern. She must—gracious!

The very boat felt the tug, and Patricia looked up to see the twig level with the thwart. Her heart leaped, but she was not going to be flustered this time. Methodically she shipped the sculls, biting her lip with vexation as one slipped out of the rowlock and had to be lifted in again: then, getting well over the line, she caught hold, and began

to haul. The dead weight made her think for a moment that she had got caught in the weeds, but the line suddenly woke up, and began a terrific tugging. Patricia squatted: she was afraid of being pulled out of the boat: squatted, and hauled for all she was fit. He went all ways at once, but she gained on him bit by bit, until he seemed to lose heart, and she drew the line in almost to the lead with little more opposition than five or six old boots would have provided. Then, realising his danger, he woke up again, and she had all she could do to hold him. Tug, tug, tug—with the old boat spinning solemnly round, and Patricia's arms aching, her white face upturned, wrinkled and strained, in an agony of holding on. Ah—he was coming! Slowly, fist over fist, she took in inches at a time, till he broke water and splashed, close beside the boat—a monster!

Now came the worst part of all. Patricia knew you must get your hand as near his mouth as you could, so as to lift him clear of the boat's side. If you let him hit against it, he might fall off the hook; and it would be unthinkable to lose him now. She worked him a bit nearer, but he splashed terrifyingly. What was more, it was dusk, and she couldn't see properly how to get him: so there was another period of holding on, with averted face, while the big fish fought and splashed, drenching her arms and chest. At last he stopped, exhausted for the moment—and Patricia took her chance. Stooping down, she gripped the trace in both hands a bare inch from his mouth, and with every ounce of strength in her body heaved him up the side. He hit it fair and square, his head and gills clear, flapping hard enough to stave the boat in: whereupon, undignified though it was, Patricia flung an arm around his neck, and literally hugged him into the boat on top of her.

In an instant she was up, back at her place, as far away from him as she could get. He was a good three feet long. if not more, and he leaped and beat and slithered and

choked and gasped all over the bottom of the boat, fish and trace and line, in a most royal confusion.

The next step was to get the hook out of him, a task Patricia did not relish at all.

"He's too big for me to kill," she thought. "I wish I could let him alone."

But tradition was strong—and did not all Colin's lore come from old Angus Macdonald, high priest of such



matters? Therefore, conquering her fear as best she could, she edged gingerly back into the stern, and after much groping got a hold on the trace. Then, keeping a seat between her and the fish, she somehow dragged his head level with the top of it, so that he hung by his own weight. He was mercifully quiet, contenting himself with gasping and inflating his gills. Fearfully she peered closer, in what was left of the light. The hook was deep down inside

his enormous mouth. She couldn't *possibly* get it out—and, as if to confirm her conclusion, the fish came galvanically alive again, flinging himself about till the boat shook.

With a gasp, Patricia let the line go. He'd have to stay as he was, tangle or no tangle: she couldn't kill him, and she couldn't unhook him till he was dead. It was cruel to let him die, but what could she do?

A soft swishing sound behind made her look up, and instantly gave her something more pressing to think about. She was only a few yards from the second Sister! The current had taken her right back to it. Another minute, and she would be on the rocks.

"Steady, Pat. Steady, Pat."

She often used to whisper that to herself in moments of stress, and her lips formed it now as, with eyes fixed on the danger, she settled swiftly and coolly to the sculls. Actually, she got away with several yards to spare: but it was a near thing, and for the next five minutes she pulled a good deal harder than she need. All her pleasure in the adventure was gone now. She was conscious of nothing but a desire to get back as soon as possible.

The light was very uncertain, but she could see her course well enough, and after perhaps another ten minutes, by which time she was clear of both Sisters, a queer gleam on the water told her that the moon had risen at her back. The big fish kept leaping about in the darkness. Several times his cold slimy body struck against her legs, and with a sort of horror she kicked him back into the stern.

The current was stiff, but she could manage, and a breeze springing up from the south-west helped her towards Codling Point. She could do it: and, just as she had recorded this conviction, and settled down to the task, she had her next fright. A ripple, a soft sly whispering, almost a giggle—she looked over her shoulder, and saw the surface broken



by weeds, that stirred evilly. A sunken rock. Three terrified pulls on her near scull, and she was clear; saw the cold pale surface sloping away under her, with its just discernible streamers of slow weed. She would not really have come to harm if she had struck it with so light a burden: but Patricia did not realise this, and her heart beat hard for minutes afterwards.

She was halfway across. The breeze freshened, and, noting its direction, she saw wisely that she had better not run too close to Codling Point, before turning homewards. She had to run along the rocks to get in, and the wind would be blowing her square upon them. Accordingly she aimed a diagonal course, straight for the mooring place. There were rocks that way, she knew, but if she remembered rightly, they were further out to sea: they ought to be well on her left by now. Better risk them than the certain danger of being piled up on the neck of Codling Point. She must just watch for broken water, and take her chance. The wind was now catching her almost broadside on, and she could not keep the light boat steady. Do what she would, her head was blown seawards. At last she shipped her landward scull altogether, and by pulling strongly on the other, managed to keep approximately to her course. The fish, his convulsions ended, made choking sounds: half of him lay in the moonlight. Little choppy waves butted the boat's side, and Patricia, numb with effort, wondered if she would ever get in. She took fewer and fewer glances over her shoulder, for they were so discouraging. Finally she set her teeth, and resolved that she would not look again for a long time. The scull grew heavier, the boat clumsier; the wind kept maliciously shoving her off her course, and the little waves laughed louder and louder against the keel. Tears forced themselves between Patricia's eyelids. Soon she would not be able to pull any more. Good-bye, darling Mummy and Daddy. Where would she be found? Colin

would be there at her funeral, in a black tie and Sunday collar, looking troubled but important. She would be a warning, an example, a sort of grim cautionary tale.

"Oh, it's no use, I can't go on."

And then, looking over her shoulder, Patricia suddenly decided that she could go on, for the rocks were surprisingly, delightfully close, and she was well inside Codling Point already. The worst was over.

"Silly," said Patricia, blinking her eyes dry; but it was another ten minutes before she got the old boat into the harbour.

The moon was well up. She could see what she was doing now. The mooring rope hung dim and friendly down the dark side of the rock. She reached out, and her hand closed unexpectedly soon upon it. Funny, it was hard to judge distances in the dark. Wearily and thankfully she pulled out along the rope, and slung the heavy wet knot into the boat. The fish was shivering all over; that was the end, she knew. He was past all feeling, as good as dead. How should she manage? She would have to jump again. There was no kind hand to help her out of the stern, and it wasn't going to be an easy jump from the boat to the dark rock, either. What about the fish? He was far too heavy to throw ashore.

She pondered for a moment, and decided to wind up as much of the line as she could, throw the end ashore, drop the fish overboard, and drag him to land after her. There was a knife in the boat: she would take that, too. After she had got him off the hook, and disentangled the line, she would throw both line and knife back in the boat. It wasn't a perfect scheme, as it left them lying about loose, instead of put tidily back in their locker: but it would have to do.

The rope was heavy stuff for cold hands, but she got it tied at last, and prepared for the last stage of her enterprise.

Unfastening the end of the line, she wound up as much as she could, until she reached the tangle, when she promptly unwound a few yards again. Next, she hauled on the mooring rope and brought the boat in close under the rocks. Oh, dear! it was going to be a terribly difficult jump. The face of the rock was all in shadow: she couldn't properly see which was rock and which was water. She pulled the boat in as far as it would go, and then, hanging on with one hand, she reached for the line and threw it high up on the rock. It slithered, but fetched up safe in a cranny. The knife followed, clattering. Next, the fish had to go overboard. She dragged him up the side, and let him go with a plop. He'd be heavy to carry home. Hullo—she'd forgotten the first fish, the little one. It meant loosening her grip on the rope, but she got him and threw him up into safety. Then, bracing her feet against the inside of the bow, she hauled with both hands for all she was worth—and jumped.

"It's all right, I'm still alive," she was saying to herself a few seconds later. She had landed comfortably on a broad ledge, in about six inches of water, hanging on desperately and quite unnecessarily to the face of the rock. Her right knee had had a scrape, but that was the utmost of the damage. A warm flow of thankfulness flooded through her, and, singing softly, she scrambled up into the moonlight.

There was the small fish, and there was the line. She began to haul it in—and the big fish appeared in the water, floating on his side, moving irrelevantly at an angle. There was something uncannily beautiful about his response to the hidden pull, his stiff farewell to the water in which he had swum so powerfully. Then the shadow swallowed him, and Patricia had a job to drag him up to her perch.

It was only the work of a minute to cut the hook free—and then Patricia realised that she needn't have bothered.

All she had to do was to unfasten the hook from the trace, and the hook would have been taken out at the house. She needn't have brought the knife at all. Oh, well, there was no Colin to laugh at her mistakes.

The line was not nearly so badly tangled as she expected, so she set to work upon it cheerfully. Breathing hard, she loosened the snarls and knots, until she could see her way to unthread the trace through them.

In five minutes she had all in order, scrambled down, pulled on the rope for the last time, threw back the line and knife, and the boat drifted slowly away into the moonlight.

"Well, Boat," said Patricia (for, funnily enough, they had no name for it; it was just The Boat), "we have had an adventure, you and I, haven't we?"

But the Boat, looking squat and secretive, kept its opinions to itself.

A piece of string through the gills, and Patricia started homewards, carrying her burden. She had to go carefully across the rocks, but, once on the beach, the rest was easy. There was a path through the fields which made the journey simple on far darker nights than this. The fish was too heavy to carry in one hand; she shifted him round to the front, and padded over the sand, with his big slimy side brushing against her shins. How big the waste of white sand looked at night, how dark and mysterious the sandhills. Moonlight or no, Patricia was glad she hadn't far to go; and the lights of the house were very welcome.

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Patricia's cousins were sensible people. They neither made a heroine of her, nor thought her silly, and she could not help seeing that secretly they approved of her exploit, and were not sorry that Colin had been put in his place. He, to give him his due, did not at all resent what had

happened, but treated her with a marked increase of respect, asking her to come and bathe with him off the rocks, and offering to coach her with her diving, an offer which she gladly accepted. Thus the next morning passed pleasantly enough. They had some of Patricia's big fish for lunch, but with the best will in the world she was obliged to confess that he was not very exciting.

"They're not awfully good, these big chaps," said Uncle George. "Though the crofters round here much prefer them to a great many fish. Mackerel, for instance, they won't touch. If you give them a choice, they'll plump for these every time."

In the afternoon they had a picnic by Loch Morar, "the deepest lake in the British Isles," as Colin solemnly assured her; and on the way back Patricia, looking at the hill the young man had asked her to climb, calculated that she would not need more than twenty minutes at the outside to get there from the house. Judging from the night before, if she left a few minutes after dinner, she would have time and to spare.

"You're not going to row over to Skye, or anything?" smiled her aunt, when she asked leave.

Patricia hung her head and grinned.

"Very well, then; but don't be out late again, will you?"

"No, rather not."

She felt a little awkward as they went out after dinner. It seemed so self-important to be going off by herself, with everyone knowing. Colin was looking at her in rather a funny way, she thought.

"I say——"

She hesitated, then made up her mind. As long as he didn't come anywhere within sight of the place, it wouldn't matter. Besides, she would be glad of his company on her own account. Could she tell him? Or would it sound too hopelessly silly and schoolgirlish?

“Colin——”

He stopped, and turned round.

“Yes?”

“Oh . . . I say . . . Colin . . .” And in halting sentences, feeling more and more awkward, she told him something of her errand.

To her vast relief he didn’t seem to see anything silly in it at all.

“Rather,” he said. “Of course I’ll come. I’ll tell you what. We can go along together to the foot of the hill, and then I’ll pop in and talk to old Donald the shepherd while you go on to the place.”

“Then, if I don’t come down in——”

“If you don’t come in ten minutes, I’ll come with Donald and see what’s up.”

“Good. That’ll be splendid.” And Patricia could not deny to herself that she felt much easier in her mind.

They parted at the foot of the hill, and with a few minutes to spare, Patricia slowly made her way up. The heather was quite dry again; only a patch of bright green here and there warned her of the spongy ground beneath. As she neared the top, her steps grew slower and slower, and she kept her eyes fixed on the slanting rock, expecting every moment to hear the same low whistle. But no sound came, and at last, delay how she might, Patricia found herself below the rock and in front of the dark clump of undergrowth. At that moment, the sun, preparing for its descent between Rum and the end of Skye, came out from behind a narrow cloud and startled Patricia by suddenly throwing her shadow on the slope beside her. Looking more closely at the undergrowth, she saw that, as her friend had said, it was growing across the mouth of a hollow, and was not so thick as she had at first supposed. The place where she was standing was a little uneven platform of grass. Evidently the whole face of the hill in this part had once been

rock, but the rains had gradually washed down more and more soil from above, so that now the rock only peeped out here and there. She walked up to the bushes—half afraid that someone or something would bounce out at her—and gingerly pulled a branch aside. At first she could see nothing; then, by degrees, dim shapes grew from the shadow, and she made out the shape of the hollow and its walls; earth, moss and rock, stained with the drippings of peat water. A black, damp, uninviting place. She pulled the branches aside boldly, and, the more she saw of the place, the less she liked it. What on earth had her friend meant by asking her to come here? Had he simply been playing a trick on her? For a moment she felt hurt and angry, till she remembered the expression on his face, when he had asked her to come, and dismissed the thought as treason.

Then, suddenly, miraculously, the place began to grow light, with a wonderful diffused radiance, which grew every second. Patricia looked behind her, but there was nothing to account for it, so she pushed her way a little further in. The look back into daylight had dazzled her eyes, and for a couple of seconds she saw nothing; then a gleam appeared on the wall of the hollow, and with a cry of surprise Patricia saw that the light was coming through an opening high above her head. She hesitated no longer, but scrambled right inside. Little clods of earth rattled dully about her, but she was too busy to notice them. A triangular hole had been made with pieces of stone; she could feel them; it was overgrown on the outside, but there was still room for the sun, striking directly through, to send a beam like a small searchlight into the gloom. So that was why he had been so particular to fix the exact time for her to come!

She turned, and looked into the recesses of the hollow. The shrubbery at its mouth made an almost complete screen. But for the opening, all would be in darkness.

The beam was moving rapidly. Soon the sun would



have sunk too far, and all would be dark again. Fascinated, Patricia followed its course across the wall. Roots, moss, rock and dark wet earth. It dipped, and she saw that there was a further hollow in the corner, lower, smaller altogether. The orange searchlight hovered on its edge, then cast a gentle light full into it: and with a turn of the heart Patricia saw that there was something lying there.

An astonishing turmoil of thoughts and emotions raged in her mind, for what can only have been a couple of seconds. Repressing her first mad instinct to run, she stooped, picked up a piece of earth, and threw it at the something. It did not stir.

Then loyalty to her friend conquered, and she stumbled across to see, in the best of the light, what the strange object was.

It was a skeleton.

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"Yes," said old Mr. Larminie, closing the book. "That's who it is, young lady. There's no doubt about it. The tartan is all perished, but the buttons, the dirk, and above all, the ring, are conclusive evidence."

"It's the most extraordinary thing I've ever heard in my life," ejaculated Uncle George.

Mr. Larminie made an expressive gesture with his eyes and hand.

"It is, certainly, a verra strange occurrence," he said, "But then, this is a place where strange things do occur." He turned again to Patricia. "In whatever way it has come to pass, young lady, ye have been in conversation with a man who died more than one hundred and sixty years before ye were born."

Patricia stared at him. On the night of her discovery, she had alternated between being frightened and not being frightened. It was certainly frightening to think that she

had actually talked with a ghost, and yet the memory of him was not frightening at all. Walking on the shore the day after, and reasoning it out by herself, she had come to feel happier and happier about it. She had been able to do a great service to someone whom she had liked the moment she set eyes on him, and, now that she knew he was a gallant follower of Prince Charlie, having staked his all for him, and finally lost his life, hiding from the savage search that raged after the Prince's escape, her heart went out in a flood of thankfulness for the wonderful thing that had happened to her. She, who had all her life wished she could have lived in those glorious times, and been a second Flora Macdonald in her Prince's aid, had been called back over the waste of years and given her chance as a Graham to do something for one who loved as she loved, and had given his life in service of the lad that was born to be king.

"Yes," Mr. Larminie looked at her under his great white eyebrows, "you have solved a great mystery. No one ever knew what had come to him. The mountains were searched for years afterwards, but no trace was found, and now we know why."

Two days later, when the mortal remains of Angus Alastair Gordon were laid to rest in the burying place of his fathers, Patricia stood proudly by the graveside, and felt that her own country had truly taken her to its heart, and that she had indeed come home.

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